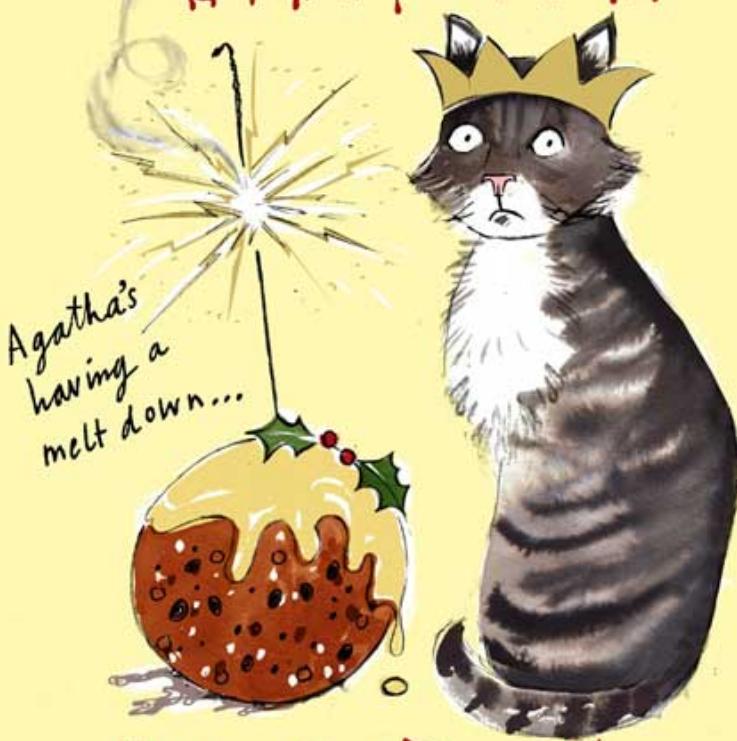


# Agatha Raisin AND THE **CHRISTMAS CRUMBLE**



**m.c. beaton**

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# Agatha Raisin and the Christmas Crumble

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# Agatha Raisin and the Christmas Crumble

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## PART ONE

Agatha Raisin, private detective, and her friend Mrs. Bloxby, the vicar's wife, sat in the shabby vicarage drawing room in the Cotswold village of Carsely one Saturday in late November, drinking coffee and looking out at a vista of sleety rain driving across the tombstones of the churchyard at the end of the garden.

"Are you going away for Christmas, Mrs. Raisin?" asked Mrs. Bloxby. Both women still addressed each other by their surnames, a fashion started in the now defunct Ladies Society but which they kept up.

"I might have a Christmas party here," said Agatha.

"But you tried that before!" exclaimed Mrs. Bloxby.

"This time it will be all right," said Agatha mulishly. Mrs. Bloxby surveyed her with affectionate exasperation. Good detective though she was and the very picture of modern woman from her glossy brown hair to her patent leather high boots, Mrs. Bloxby reflected, not for the first time, that there was a part of Agatha that had never grown up.

"People are apt to chase after a romantic image of Christmas which does not exist," said Mrs. Bloxby cautiously. She brushed a wisp of hair from her face and looked anxiously at her friend. "Most of the population only experience a spiritual feeling of awe when they are small children and look on Santa Claus for the first time. That's what they remember and are ever after chasing that magic."

"I never met Santa Claus," said Agatha, thinking of her own deprived childhood in a Birmingham slum.

"I think," pursued Mrs. Bloxby, "that the true Christmas feeling is thinking and caring about other people—like the elderly and infirm, say."

Agatha brightened. "Great idea."

"What?" asked Mrs. Bloxby nervously.

"There are a lot of crumblies in this village. I mean sometimes the Cotswolds feel like God's waiting room. Come in, number five, says a voice from the heavens. Your number's up. I'll give them a slap-up Christmas dinner."

"They will probably be having Christmas with their families. But come to think of it, I do know six elderly people who were left alone last Christmas."

"That's a nice little number," said Agatha. "I'm always working, so I'm a bit out of touch with the villagers. Who are they?"

"There's Mrs. Matilda Glossop, Mr. Harry Dunster, Mr. Jake Turnbull, Miss Freda Pinch, Mr. Simon Trent and . . ."

She hesitated. "And who?" prompted Agatha.

"There's Len Leech, but he can be difficult."

"How difficult?"

"He fancies himself as a ladies' man."

"How old is he?"

"I believe he's in his eighties."

Agatha laughed. "He's at the Look, don't touch age. I can handle that."

Mrs. Bloxby turned pink. "He pinched my bottom. And in the church!"

"The old devil. Maybe he got you mixed up with Pippa Middleton. What did you do?"

"I preferred to ignore it."

"I'd have hit him with my handbag. Don't worry. I'll cope. Have you their addresses?"

Mrs. Bloxby rose and walked over to an old bureau. Opened a drawer and pulled out a large ledger. "I keep all the names and addresses of the parishioners in here."

Agatha took out a notebook. "Fire away. I'll give this lot of crumblies the best Christmas they have ever had."

Matilda Glossop was a fine-looking woman in her late seventies. She had a pleasant face, thick white hair and brown eyes. She stared down at the pretty invitation card Agatha had sent her and felt tears well up in her eyes. Matilda had met Agatha at a fundraiser and had found her to be a rather terrifying woman. On the other hand, her son and daughter had written—not phoned—to say they were spending Christmas in the Bahamas. The year before, it had been the Maldives. They always holidayed together with their spouses and grandchildren. She sat down to pen an acceptance.

Harry Dunster was ninety years old and proud of it. "Go on! Guess my age," he was fond of demanding. He was a small man with a dowager's hump and he walked painfully with the aid of a stick. His tragedy was that he had outlived his son, Charles, who had been killed in a motor accident when he was only twenty-one. Shortly after that, Harry's wife had died of cancer. He was often quite hungry, his pension going on cigarettes and petrol for his ancient Ford. He was delighted with Agatha's invitation, imagining a slap-up meal of turkey and all the trimmings.

Jake Turnbull was eighty-five, a stocky barrel-shaped farmer. He had a nasty temper, no wife and no friends. He usually spent Christmas getting thoroughly drunk. He was also a bit of a miser and delighted in the thought of free food and booze.

Freda Pinch was a spinster, or, as the politically correct would say, a single woman. Her surname was appropriate, because she had a pinched little face, thinning salt-and-pepper hair and a flat-chested figure. Although she was small in stature, she had very large feet and hands, making her look like the illustration of a witch in a children's book. She was eighty-two years old. She did not like Agatha. Agatha was known to have men staying overnight, Disgraceful! But then, there was the thought of another bleak Christmas on her own. She decided to accept.

Simon Trent was eighty years old but looked as if he were in his sixties. His brown hair had only a few threads of grey in it, and he had a pleasant craggy face. He was tall, age having not shrunk his skeleton very much. He was a retired engineer. He was considered a useful man in the village because he did car repairs, often not charging anything at all. His wife had fallen in love with a plumber a long time ago and had run off and left him. After the divorce, Simon had not felt like getting married again. He knew of Agatha's prowess as a detective and admired her. He decided to go to her Christmas dinner.

Len Leech read his invitation with a slow smile. That Raisin woman was considered a bit of a fast mover. She must have seen him around the village and set her sights on him. When he looked in the mirror, Len saw a handsome man. Others saw an eighty-five-year-old with dyed black hair, small black eyes set too close together and a wide fleshy mouth. He had a beer paunch and thick fingers like chipolata sausages. Agatha would have been horrified if she could have seen the

pornographic film that was already running inside Len's head. Len was pleased to think that because Agatha in her early fifties was past childbearing age, he would not have to buy condoms. Never liked the things anyway. Like making love in your socks. Three wives had divorced him before getting round to producing children. His ego swelling like a bullfrog, he wrote a fulsome acceptance, beginning, *Dear lady*.

Roy Silver, Agatha's friend and former employee from the days when she ran a London PR agency, arrived the following weekend. His appearance changed according to which client or clients he was representing, and his latest client was a pop band called Sod Off. They were trying to reinvent punk. His fine hair was dyed pink and green and gelled up into a crest. His jeans were ripped at the knee. And, to Agatha's horror, he had two nose rings.

"What have you done to yourself?" cried Agatha. "You look like retro shit. And those nose piercings! What are you going to do when that ridiculous fashion dies? You'll need to pay for plastic surgery to get the holes filled in."

Roy shrugged. "It's this village life, babes. You've gone all old-fashioned." His sleeveless denim jacket revealed thin arms covered down to the wrists in swirling blue and red tattoos. "Don't glare," he said. "They peel off."

"What will the villagers think?" mourned Agatha. "Don't go outside this cottage without a bag over your head."

"It's not as bad as that."

"Trust me. It is. Does that canary-coloured gel wash off?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's a start. Go upstairs and have a shower and find some more conservative clothes."

Roy trailed sulkily upstairs, to emerge later with clean hair and wearing a striped shirt and corduroy trousers. "Now you look more like a human being and less like a throwback to the seventies," said Agatha. She told him about her Christmas party.

"Am I invited?" asked Roy.

"I suppose so," said Agatha reluctantly. "Haven't you anywhere else to go?"

"No, and I'm your friend, right? I bet you've asked James and Charles."

James Lacey, Agatha's next-door neighbor, was her ex-husband, and Sir Charles Fraith a friend who came and went in her life.

"I don't know where James is," said Agatha. "He travels a lot. Charles has disappeared out of my life again and this is a party for the elderly. I'm concentrating on giving them a good Christmas."

"Are you going to give them all presents?"

"I suppose so. Something small."

"What about decorations?" asked Roy.

"I've got loads left over from the last two Christmas parties."

"You'll need a real tree."

"Never again," said Agatha. "The cats will sabotage it. I'm getting a nice fake one. Besides, it's rather miserable after Christmas to have a dying tree looking at you accusingly."

"You'll get caterers to do the cooking."

"I would like to do something myself," said Agatha. "I know. I'll make the Christmas pudding. It can't be that hard if one treats it like a scientific experiment."

"We'll make it this weekend and let it mature," said Roy.

"I've got a Sarah Smith cookbook," said Agatha. "Her recipes are supposed to be easy."

She took out the cookery book and found a recipe for Christmas pudding. "It looks awfully complicated," said Roy, reading over her shoulder.

"Oh, we'll go out and buy all the stuff and then take it bit by bit," said Agatha.

Late that afternoon, they returned carrying cartons of shopping. "Let's leave it until tomorrow," pleaded Roy.

"No, I want to get started now," said Agatha. "Unpack all the stuff and put it on the kitchen table and then you read out Sarah's instructions."

"Okay. But I'm going to have a stiff drink first," said Roy. "Have one yourself. You might need it."

"Get yourself a drink and start reading." Agatha wrapped herself in an apron she had never used before. Most of her cooking was done by putting ready-made meals in the micro wave.

When Roy was finally seated at the table with a large vodka and tonic, he began to read out Sarah's instructions. "Take your largest, roomiest mixing bowl and start putting in the suet, sifted flour and breadcrumbs, spices and sugar." I don't think those are the right breadcrumbs, Aggie. They're those orange ones people put on fish. And the almonds are supposed to be skinned and chopped, not put in whole. And you didn't peel the apple."

"Nobody'll notice," said Agatha. "Read on."

What a lot of ingredients, thought Agatha. Part of the advice was to tick everything off, but Agatha couldn't be bothered. For example, she was supposed to put the barley wine, rum and stout into a smaller basin and beat it up with the eggs, but she cut corners by just pouring it all into the mix in the big bowl.

Roy took a turn stirring. "It's supposed to be sloppy," he complained.

"Easily solved," said Agatha, tipping a generous amount of rum into the bowl and then taking a swig out of the bottle to fortify herself.

"Now what?" she asked.

"You're supposed to cover it with a clean tea towel and leave to soak overnight."

"And what do we have to do tomorrow?"

"Steam it for eight hours. I didn't see you sift the flour," said Roy anxiously. "You just dumped it in."

"So I did," said Agatha, stifling a yawn. "We'll steam the beastly thing in the morning."

But the next day, after they had put the pudding on to steam, it seemed too boring to wait indoors and so they went to the pub for lunch and forgot about it, only remembering as they were strolling back down the road. Both broke into a run. The windows of the cottage were covered in steam. Agatha ran through billowing clouds of steam in time to put more water into the pot which was about to boil dry.

They opened the doors and windows to let the steam out and then Agatha had to field phone calls from various villagers asking if her house was on fire.

"It's been on four hours." Agatha peered at the pudding anxiously. "That should be enough. What do I do with it now?"

"You're supposed to put it in a cool place like an un-heated bedroom."

"Everything's heated in this house," said Agatha. "I'll put it down in the shed."

"Maybe you should buy one from a supermarket just in case," suggested Roy.

“What! After all my work!”

“And mine,” pointed out Roy. “Nonetheless . . .”

“Nonetheless nothing,” said Agatha. “Sarah is supposed to be infallible.”

“Only if you follow the recipe,” muttered Roy.

\*\*\*\*

Agatha’s friend, Sir Charles Fraith, who had the keys to her cottage, strolled in one evening shortly before Christmas, to find Agatha trying to fend off her cats, Hodge and Boswell, as she decorated a large fake-green Christmas tree.

“Thought you’d be off soon to somewhere sunny,” said Charles. “Why all the decorations?”

Agatha told him.

“For a hard-nosed detective, occasionally you’re a bit of a dreamer, Agatha. Do you expect them all to tug their forelocks and say, ‘Thank you, Lady Bountiful’?”

“Stop bitching and help me with this tinsel.”

“I hope you’ve got caterers,” said Charles.

“I have. But not for the pudding. I made that myself.”

“Where is it?”

“Down in the garden shed.”

“It’s been unusually mild recently, Agatha. Are you sure the flies won’t have got to it?”

“It’s sealed.”

“Maybe I’d better have a look at it.” Charles strolled towards the kitchen door with the cats at his heels.

“Look! But don’t touch.” Agatha called after him.

Charles opened the shed door and then backed away. He felt like someone in a *CSI* television programme discovering a rotting corpse. The air was full of the hum of flies. The pudding was sitting on a potting bench with black flies swirling around it. He gritted his teeth, stepped into the shed, and carried the pudding back up the garden and into the kitchen.

“You’d better come and see this,” he called. “The bowl’s covered in flies.”

Agatha rushed in, took one horrified look at the bowl, seized a can of fly killer and sprayed the pudding.

“There. That’s all right,” she said as dying flies rolled around the kitchen table.

“Don’t you think it might now taste awful?” asked Charles.

“No. It’s well sealed. Clean up those flies, Charles. I know, I’ll put it in the fridge. Why didn’t Sarah think of that?”

“Obviously because that’s one thing you shouldn’t do.”

“Rats! She said a cool place and so the fridge is a cool place. Don’t nag. Just shovel up the flies. Do you want to come to this dinner?”

“When is it?”

“Christmas Day.”

“Can’t. Got to carve the bird at home. Do video it. I could do with a laugh.”

Roy arrived on Christmas Eve, just as Agatha was preparing to turn the pudding onto a plate.

“There!” she said triumphantly. “Oh, no, I think it’s going to fall apart. What will I do?”

"We could make a toffee glaze and pour it over. All we need is a lot of sugar and water. I can do that."

Agatha waited nervously until Roy had made the toffee covering. He poured it over the pudding. "Now, if we put it gently back in the fridge, it'll harden. Stick some holly on the top and it'll look great. But God knows what it will taste like. I checked the ingredients you had left out."

"I didn't leave any out," howled Agatha.

"Suit yourself."

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Matilda Glossop fretted over what to wear. It seemed a long time since she had been invited to any social event. She finally chose a black wool dress and tied a scarlet silk scarf at the neck to brighten it up. She had knitted a soft wool scarf for Agatha.

Harry Dunster decided on comfort, putting on his usual ratty old cardigan and checked shirt over a pair of black trousers, shiny with age. For a present he chose a pretty Crown Derby teacup. It was a bit chipped and had lost its saucer a long time ago.

Jack Turnbull thought that Agatha was rich enough not to need any present from him. Still, it *was* Christmas. He reluctantly wrapped up a bottle of homemade sloe gin in a piece of newspaper. He put on the ratcatchers outfit he used for hunting: tweed hacking jacket and cords. Hunting was his one luxury.

Simon Trent put on his evening suit, glad that it still fitted. He wrapped up a pretty mother-of-pearl powder compact he had found in an antique shop and also wrapped up a bottle of champagne in Christmas paper.

Freda Pinch was wearing a long green evening gown and fake pearls. Her face was heavily made up. She decided not to buy Agatha anything. If Agatha was playing the part of the Lady Bountiful, then let her give and not expect anything. Simon Trent would be there and Freda often fantasised about him.

Len Leech put on his "best" clothes: a silk shirt and striped tie, double-breasted blazer with the Carsely bowling club crest on the pocket and dark trousers. His present for Agatha was a black lace thong. That'll get her in the right mood, he thought complacently.

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The party of elderly people was finally assembled in Agatha's sitting room, where she had decided to put the tree with presents for all of them underneath it. Her cats had done their best to sabotage the tree decorations and so she had begged her cleaner, Doris Simpson, to look after them for the day.

"Welcome, everyone," cried Agatha. "I have some presents for you. Roy will pass them out."

"Ladies first," said Roy. "Mrs. Glossop."

Matilda nervously unwrapped her present. It was a very beautiful cashmere shawl. Agatha had fretted about what to give everyone so much that she had settled on expensive presents.

Next came Freda Pinch. Her present was an electric foot massager. She murmured her startled thanks at the generosity of the gift.

"Harry Dunster," called Roy. He was enjoying himself despite the fact that Agatha

had forced him to wear a conservative suit and tie.

Harry creaked forward and unwrapped his long present with arthritic fingers. Revealed was an ebony cane with a silver top. He stared at it in surprise. "It be right beautiful," he said. "Thanks."

Jake Turnbull was equally delighted to get a case of fine burgundy. Simon Trent received a gift token for an expensive dinner for two at a posh restaurant in Broadway.

Last came Len Leech. Before Agatha could guess what he was going to do, he whipped out a spring of mistletoe, held it over her head and tried to kiss her on the mouth. She jerked her head away and said sharply, "Do open your present, Mr. Leech."

"Len to you, sweetie," he leered.

His present was a Chinese silk dressing gown. As he grinned down at it and then gave Agatha a salacious smile, she realised the folly of her choice of present.

Then it was Agatha's turn. She left Len Leech's offering to the last, wishing he would stop smirking and ogling her. His rather prominent eyes roamed over her body. She felt they were like two snails, leaving pornographic trails.

She stared down at the thong. "Thanks," she said curtly. "Shall we go in to dinner?"

Len charged ahead and took a seat at the top of the table, leaving Agatha to sit at the other end, with her back to the hall. Freda tried to grab a seat next to Simon Trent, but she had stumbled in her rush and so he got there before her and took a place next to Matilda. Jake Turnbull was already on his other side. Roy helped old Harry Dunster to a chair next to Agatha, and then sat on her other side.

Agatha was pleased with the room. Holly decorated the picture frames and tall candles shone down on the table. She was glad she had decided to give up any pretence of having cooked practically all of the dinner herself. After the Christmas crackers had been pulled, the first course of pâté arrived.

"Has anyone heard this one about the actress and the bishop?" asked Len.

"Frequently," snapped Agatha.

"What about the one about the gorilla? This gorilla kidnapped this woman and . . ."

"Heard it," said Roy. "Everyone's heard it. Kindly leave the stage."

But Freda, flushed with unaccustomed wine and feeling like the femme fatale of her fantasies, said, "I haven't."

"This here gorilla," said Len, "kidnaps this woman in Africa. Takes her up his tree and rapes her for two months. She's rescued and gets back to America. She's crying and telling a friend about her ordeal. 'It must be awful for you,' says the friend. 'It is,' says this woman. 'He doesn't write. He doesn't phone.' " And Len laughed so hard, he nearly fell off his chair.

"But I don't understand," said Freda. "Who doesn't write or phone?"

"The gorilla doesn't," said Len.

"But gorillas do not know how to write or phone. Do you mean, perhaps, whoever rescued her?"

Simon began to laugh.

"Oh, forget it," said Len sulkily.

Their plates were removed and then the turkey was wheeled in. Soon everyone was digging in and there was a murmur of conversation from everyone but Len as

vegetables were passed around and gravy poured.

"This is absolutely delicious, Mrs. Raisin," said Matilda.

"Agatha, please."

Roy was wondering nervously if Agatha was being too generous with the wine that the caterers were diligently pouring as soon as they saw an empty glass. He looked down the table at Len and with a sinking heart recognised the signs of a nasty drunk. Len had moved from the jolly stage to the sentimental stage. His eyes filled with tears, he kept praising and toasting Agatha. Roy guessed he would soon move to the mean and belligerent stage.

"This is very good of you," said Simon. "The food is delicious."

"And I'll drink to that," said Len. "Come on, you ancient lot. Drink up."

"I've a feeling he's going to get out of hand," Matilda whispered to Simon. He smiled down at her, thanking his stars he had what he considered the best company at the party.

"Don't worry. I'll cope with him."

Jake Turnbull pushed his glass away. He suddenly, for the first time in ages, did not feel like getting drunk. The food was marvellous and he was overwhelmed with the fact that he did not have to spend Christmas on his own.

Old Harry Dunster refused more wine as well. The food was a dream and he didn't want to lose a bit of its savour.

"Is this a charity dinner, like?" demanded Len truculently.

"It's a Christmas dinner, that's all," said Agatha.

"Makes you feel good, does it?" pursued Len. "I suppose you rich people can afford it."

Simon threw down his napkin. He went up to Len and bent over him.

"If you don't shut your face," he whispered, "I'll push your teeth down your throat."

He then smiled around the company and resumed his seat.

Len simmered with hatred. There was that Agatha female queening it and she was little better than a whore with that toy boy of hers at her side.

Finally the plates were cleared away. Agatha went into the kitchen and paid off the caterers and then called to Roy to help her with the pudding. It stood on a decorated plate on the kitchen table. Roy sniffed it. "Agatha, I could swear this pudding smells of insecticide."

"Nonsense."

"Are you going to light it here?"

"No, put it on the side table behind Len. I was supposed to sit there. I'll take in the pudding and you bring in the bowls and the brandy butter."

Agatha carried in the pudding. Everyone except Len cheered. Roy beamed all round from the doorway. Agatha's Christmas was a success after all.

But Agatha found that the caterers had taken away their serving table. Roy went back into the kitchen, put down his tray of bowls and brandy butter and carried in a stool.

"Is this all you can find?" asked Agatha. "It's very low. Oh, well, I'll see if I can manage."

"Clear a space on the table and put it there," said Roy.

"No, we'll manage. Put the tray on the floor beside me and hand me a bottle of rum. I'm going to light it."

Agatha bent over the pudding—and that is what caused the subsequent tragedy. For Agatha, in her early fifties, had dressed to distinguish herself as far as possible from her aged guests. Under her short skirt, she was wearing lacy topped stockings and frilly knickers. And as she bent over, Len swivelling round in his chair, got a splendid view. His beefy hands seem to move of their own accord. He turned round, leaned forward, slid his hands up Agatha's skirt and squeezed her buttocks.

"You filthy bastard!" cried Agatha in a red rage. Len swung back round and stared at the table as if he had nothing to do with it. Agatha picked up the pudding in both hands and brought it down on his head.

For one shocked moment, the guests stared at what looked like Pudding Man. Where Len's head should have been was a round pudding. The candlelight shone on the toffee coating, giving the odd illusion of two flickering eyes.

The pudding must be uncooked in the middle, thought Roy wildly, as brown gunk began to pour down onto Len's clothes.

Then Len sagged forward and fell with his pudding head on the table and lay still.

"You've smothered him!" screamed Freda as Agatha began to desperately claw the pudding from Len's head.

Simon hurried round to join her and moved her gently aside. He felt Len's neck for a pulse and found none. "He's dead, Agatha," he said.

"He can't be," said Agatha, white-faced in the candlelight. "Roy, phone for an ambulance."

"Just done that," said Roy.

Simon pulled away as much of the pudding as he could and laid Len down on the floor. He tried artificial respiration and then tried the kiss of life without success.

"Get me some water and towels," ordered Simon, "and I'll clean him up."

"Shouldn't he be left like that?" said Freda's shrill voice.

"Why?" demanded Matilda.

"Well, she killed him. That's why. Call the police."

"Get me that water," ordered Simon. "He's probably died of a heart attack. I can't leave him like this."

"I have to go to the toilet," said Freda.

"Upstairs on your left," said Roy.

No sooner was she in the bathroom than Freda called the police.

And so it was that Agatha's first Cotswold friend, Detective Sergeant Bill Wong, working over Christmas, received the call that Agatha Raisin had murdered Len Leech with a Christmas pudding.

## PART TWO

“What do you make of it?” asked Detective Constable Alice Peterson as she and Bill sped towards Carsely.

“Agatha’s a dreadful cook,” said Bill. “Let’s hope she hasn’t poisoned anyone.”

“We’ve made good time,” said Alice as they turned down into the road leading to Carsely. “The ambulance is just in front of us.”

Agatha was waiting at the door. “Oh, Bill,” she cried. “I haven’t done anything.”

“Let us in, Mrs. Raisin,” said Bill formally. “We need to view the scene first.”

Mrs. Raisin, not Agatha. Things are looking bad, thought Agatha.

He and Alice stood in the doorway of the dining room. Len’s face had been washed clean of pudding and he had been laid out on the floor. But his clothes were spattered with brown stains of uncooked pudding and shards of toffee.

Bill stood aside to let the paramedics through. “Make sure that he is really dead and then leave the scene. Did you try to revive him?”

“Yes,” said Simon.

“So what happened? Is a Miss Freda Pinch here?”

“That’s me,” said Freda. She pointed at Agatha. “She did it. She hit him on the head with a Christmas pudding.”

Harry Dunster shouted, “You’re lying. I saw it all. Agatha was about to serve and Len knocked her arm and the pudding fell on his head.”

“Yes, I saw that too,” said Matilda quickly. “Didn’t you see it, Simon?”

“Yes, we all saw it.”

“I’m not going to let that woman get away with murder,” screamed Freda.

Bill looked apologetically at Agatha. “Could you escort your guests through to your sitting room? I will take statements. In view of Miss Pinch’s accusation, I will need to call in a forensic team. For the moment, the body cannot be removed. I will interview you one at a time in the kitchen.”

He phoned headquarters in Mircester and asked for the Scenes of Crimes Operatives but was told as it was Christmas, no one would be available until the following day.

Agatha was the first to be called through to the kitchen. “Before we go any further,” said Bill, “what happened to the pudding?”

“Simon Trent cleaned him up. We couldn’t leave him like that.”

“So where are the remains of the pudding?”

“In that plastic bag over there.”

“Right. That will need to be examined. What happened?”

Agatha told Bill and Alice about her desire to give some of the elderly residents a Christmas dinner. The only thing she had cooked was the pudding.

“So what *exactly* happened?”

I’m going to lie to my friend, thought Agatha. But I’m damned if I’m going to serve a life sentence for murdering someone with a pudding.

“I was about to serve it. I was standing behind Len. He had been making passes at me all evening. He was an old lech. He half-stood up and knocked the tray. The

pudding landed on his head.” Agatha bit her lip. “I must have made a mistake in the cooking because it was soft in the middle but had a toffee coating. It landed right on his head. It enveloped his head.” She bit back a sob.

“Could we do this tomorrow, Bill? I’m in shock. The guests are elderly and should be allowed home.”

“Yes, we’ll take their names and addresses and let them go. But you and Mr. Silver must accompany us to headquarters for questioning.”

Agatha waited nervously in an interview room at the police station. Roy had been taken off to a separate room. She felt miserable, frightened and exhausted. She had been unable to get through to her lawyer. If she asked them to supply a lawyer, they would probably lock her up in a cell until morning and she desperately wanted it to be all over. What on earth had possessed her to lose her temper like that? Perhaps it was the sheer insult that an old crumblie like Len should think she was fair game. If only she hadn’t invited that horrible woman, Freda Pinch.

The door opened and Chief Inspector Wilkes walked in, accompanied by a police sergeant Agatha had not seen before. Wilkes had decided that Bill Wong was too friendly with the suspect to conduct the interview.

Agatha fidgeted as the police sergeant set up the recording and video. His name was Pratt. How appropriate, thought Agatha, disliking the man’s small, beady accusing eyes.

“Now, Mrs. Raisin,” said Wilkes. “Begin at the beginning.”

So Agatha did.

Pratt interrupted when she had got as far as the pudding recipe. “My missus always cooks a Sarah Smith Christmas pudding. Great it is. You must have buggered it up. My missus is a dab hand at . . .”

“Can we get on with the interview?” asked Wilkes coldly.

Pratt interrupted again when Agatha began to describe Len’s lecherous advances.

“Now, then,” he said with a grin, “you ladies of a certain age often imagine us fellows are after you when they’re just being kind.”

Agatha’s face flamed. “Look here, you pillock,” she snarled, “it was not my imagination.”

“I’ll have you for insulting a police officer,” yelled Pratt.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Wilkes wearily.

The night dragged on as Agatha was taken over and over her statement. Then a sealed bowl of rice was brought in on a tray. It was guessed to be the same weight as the pudding. Agatha had to demonstrate over and over again how the accident had happened. Pratt acted the part of Len. To Agatha’s delight, she finally managed to tilt the tray so that the bowl of rice came down on Pratt’s head. The cling film covering split and Pratt swore dreadfully as rice cascaded down over him. At last, she was told not to leave the country and to hold herself in readiness for further questioning.

Agatha found a miserable Roy waiting for her in reception. “The press are waiting for us outside,” he said. “For once in my life I don’t feel like facing them.”

“We’ll use the back door,” said Agatha, “and go home and pack a couple of suitcases and find a hotel. My cottage will soon be crawling with forensic people.”

The next morning, Simon drove around the village collecting the other five of Agatha’s guests in his minibus. The night before he had arranged to take all of them along to police headquarters.

He collected Matilda first so that she could sit beside him. When everyone was in the bus, he said, "I am sure we are all agreed that Agatha upset that pudding over Len's head, right?"

"That's not how it happened," said Freda shrilly. "She did it deliberately. She killed him and so I shall tell them."

"They won't believe you," said Harry Dunster. "They'll see you for the jealous old bag you are."

"How dare you!" shrieked Freda. "I'll have that woman arrested for murder if it's the last thing I do."

"Could well be," said Jake Turnbull.

"It's no use threatening me," said Freda. "I shall tell the truth."

Freda was the only one not to have been moved by Agatha's generosity. Matilda was shyly attracted to Simon and thought that if it hadn't been for Agatha she would never have got to know him. Harry Dunster and Jake Turn-bull thought of previous lonely Christmases and the fact that Simon had said that now they had got to know each other, he could arrange a few trips and parties.

A week later, Bill Wong called on Agatha. "Got the handcuffs?" asked Agatha gloomily.

"No, you're in the clear. You did not suffocate the man with pudding. The results of the autopsy are in. He died of a combination of alcohol, a massive dose of Viagra, and his liver was hobnailed and his heart in dangerously bad shape. But you have a problem."

"What's that?"

"Despite the testimony of our other guests that it was an accident, Freda Pinch is not only sticking to her guns, she is threatening to take out a civil suit against you, according to what she told Wilkes. Mind you, I think she is just threatening. It would cost her a hell of a lot of money, she's not even a relative, and, as the police have proved you were not guilty, she wouldn't get very far. Have you heard anything from lawyers?"

"Not a thing. Damn that bloody woman. I could kill her."

"I didn't hear that. But that pudding! Agatha, most of the ingredients were in uncooked lumps along with two dead flies. Stick to the micro wave in future."

"There must have been something wrong with the recipe."

"The infallible Sarah? Sorry. Nowhere in that recipe does she suggest adding uncooked, unchopped fruit and nuts, not to mention dead flies and insecticide."

"What'll I do about Freda?" asked Agatha.

"Just ignore it. She won't get anywhere."

After he had left, Agatha received a visit from Simon and Matilda. "I took Matilda to that restaurant in Broadway," said Simon. "We had a marvellous meal. We wondered how you were getting on."

Agatha told them about Freda and the civil suit. "Oh, dear," said Simon. "Two days ago, I took everyone into Cheltenham for the day. I included Freda in the invitation. She was pretty horrible. I won't be asking her again. It's my belief she's just trying to upset you."

"Maybe I should talk to her," said Matilda.

Simon took her hand. "You'll only get a mouthful of abuse," he said. "Leave her alone."

After they had left, Agatha phoned Mrs. Bloxby and poured out her woes. "You'll just need to ignore her," said the vicar's wife.

"I can't. I'm going to see her right now."

"There might be a difficulty. Did you actually bring that pudding down on Mr. Leech's head?"

"Got to go," said Agatha.

Simon was entertaining three of Agatha's dinner guests: Matilda, Harry, and Jake.

Matilda was falling in love with Simon, and Harry and Jake were enjoying what Jake thought of as a return to the living. No more sitting in a lonely home.

"It is a shame about Freda's case against Agatha," said Simon. "I wish we could stop it."

Old Harry caressed the silver knob of the stick Agatha had given him and said vaguely, "I've a feeling she'll come around."

It was nine in the evening when Agatha set out for Freda's cottage. Mrs. Bloxby's remark had upset her. Why on earth should Mrs. Bloxby think that she had actually rammed that pudding down on Len's head? Because she knows you well, said her conscience.

The chilly evening air was full of the scents of the countryside. The first stars were beginning to shine. The village breathed peace and serenity outside, while inside Agatha there was a turmoil of anger, guilt and fear. She realised, in that moment, how much the usual placidity of the village meant to her. Living in the Cotswolds, that famous beauty spot, had been a childhood dream. Her parents had once taken her there on holiday, and, although they had bitched about how boring it was and they would have been better off at Butlin's Holiday Camp, Agatha had fallen in love with the whole area. Why couldn't Len just have dropped dead before she had attacked him?

Freda's small thatched cottage crouched in front of one of the cobbled lanes leading off the main street. The windows on either side of the door glittered in the streetlight like two eyes peering out from under a heavy fringe of thatch.

Agatha rang the bell. There was no reply. An owl hooted from the nearby woods. Agatha then noticed the door was slightly open. She half-turned away but was suddenly determined to get this confrontation over and done with.

She edged her way in, calling, "Freda," at first quietly and then loudly. The little entrance hall was dark and she nearly tripped over a vacuum cleaner. She pushed open a door on her left and switched on the light. She found herself in a cluttered cottage living room. Photographs of Freda at every age were dotted on little tables about the room. A sofa and two armchairs were covered in some sulphurous yellow material to match the yellow painted walls.

A high-backed leather reclining chair was in front of the television set, which was showing a game show with the sound turned off.

Agatha edged round it. Freda Pinch sat there. Her eyes were closed. Her face was chalk-white apart from a livid bruise on one cheek.

Agatha felt a wave of panic. She's dead, she thought desperately. I'll be called in for questioning. Let someone else find her. I am not going to spend another night at the police station. Everyone will think I did it.

She backed slowly towards the door.

Footprints!

A forensic team would find her footprints even on this nasty carpet. Then she remembered that vacuum. She collected it from the hall, plugged it in, and began to vacuum every bit of carpet where she thought she had stood.

She had just reached the living room door when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Agatha screamed with fear and turned round.

Freda was standing there, very much alive. Her lips opened and closed. "I can't hear you!" yelled Agatha and switched off the vacuum.

"I asked you what on earth you were doing vacuuming my floor?" said Freda.

"Just being neighbourly," babbled Agatha. "I saw you were asleep and you didn't look very well, so I thought . . ."

"Just get out," said Freda wearily.

"Where did you get that bruise?" asked Agatha.

"I fell over. Now, shove off."

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Agatha hurried back to her cottage. She was just looking for her keys when once more she felt a tap on her shoulder. Again she screamed and swung round.

Bill Wong stood there. "You're a bag of nerves, Agatha. What's up?"

"Come in inside and I'll tell you after I've had a stiff gin."

Bill listened to her account of her visit to Freda, while sipping a glass of orange juice and trying hard not to laugh. When she had finished, he said, "Actually, I came to tell you that Freda has dropped the case against you. It appears she is very shortsighted and was frightened of being made a fool of in court."

"Thank goodness for that," said Agatha. "Why do my cats always drape themselves round you? I feed the beasts and the only attention I get from them is when they need more food."

"Well, I'd better go," said Bill, detaching Hodge from his neck and Boswell from his lap. "How's your love life?"

"Moribund. How's yours? What about pretty Alice?"

"Can't have romances with colleagues," said Bill. "Mum sends her love."

Agatha diplomatically accepted the lie, knowing that Bill's mother detested her.

After he had gone and she was getting ready for bed, a picture of Freda's white and bruised face came into her mind. She bit her lip in vexation. Mrs. Bloxby had told her that, with the exception of Freda, her remaining dinner guests had become fast friends.

Had one of them intimidated Freda? Was that how she got the bruise on her cheek?

Let it go, she told her never-very-active conscience.

But the following day was a Saturday and she decided to visit Simon Trent. If someone had been threatening Freda, then the least she could do was to put a stop to it.

Matilda, who blushed like a schoolgirl when she saw Agatha, opened the door of Simon's cottage. "I just dropped round to make Simon a late breakfast," she said.

"Who is it, darling?" came Simon's voice from upstairs.

"Darling?" queried Agatha with a crocodile grim.

"Come in," said Matilda. "Have you had your break-fast?"

Agatha said she had, although breakfast as usual had consisted of two Bensons and a black coffee.

As Agatha sat down at a chair in Simon's kitchen, Simon came in to join them, freshly shaved and showered.

"I came to tell you that Freda has dropped the case against me," said Agatha.

"What a relief," said Simon. "Did you show Agatha your ring?"

Matilda shyly held out her hand on which a sapphire and diamond ring glistened.

"Oh, congratulations," said Agatha sincerely, thinking, if you can nail a man at your age, there's hope for me yet. "When's the wedding?"

"In about two months' time," said Simon. "We haven't fixed an exact date yet. You've got to come. We'd never have met if it hadn't been for you." He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down opposite Agatha.

"I'm a bit worried about Freda," said Agatha.

"Why?" demanded Simon. "She's caused you nothing but trouble."

"She's got a nasty bruise on her cheek. She said it was an accident, but I cannot see such as Freda suddenly deciding to drop the case against me. I wondered if someone had tried to intimidate her."

"Who would do that?" said Matilda. "Not me or Simon."

"Isn't Jake Turnbull famous for drunken rages?" asked Agatha.

"He's pretty much sworn off the booze. Thanks to you, we've all been socialising a bit. He's turned out to be good company."

"So that leaves Harry Dunster."

Simon laughed. "He's old. He can barely walk. Freda would only need to blow on him to knock him over. I think you'll find Freda had a change of heart."

"I doubt it."

"Look," said Simon, "I'll go along and see her and let you know what she says. She might talk to me."

After Agatha had left, Simon walked along to Freda's cottage. "Come in!" cried Freda. "How nice to see you. Just excuse me a moment."

Freda rushed upstairs and applied heavy make-up and scarlet lipstick before going down to join Simon.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you. I heard you had a nasty bruise on your face and I was worried about you."

"How like you!" cried Freda. "You were the only person at that dreadful party that I feel I had some rapport with. Please sit down. I had a nasty fall, that's all."

"I am pleased you have dropped the case against Agatha."

"I decided she wasn't worth the expense and effort of going to court. Besides, that lawyer of hers was trying to get me to take an eye test. He said he could prove I couldn't have seen anything properly."

Freda was not wearing glasses, but beside her on a small table was a pair of spectacles with thick lenses.

Simon was seated on the sofa. Freda sat down next to him. She put a hand on his knee and smiled coyly up at him. "Let's not talk about that dreadful woman."

"I do have some good news," said Simon. "Matilda and I are going to get married."

Freda removed her hand and glared at him. "You're making a big mistake. That woman has men visiting her at all times of night."

She's mad, thought Simon. He got to his feet and walked straight out of the door.

Agatha heard his news when he phoned her. She then phoned her lawyer, Jeffrey Hawthorne, to thank him. "How did you guess she was so short-sighted?" said Agatha. "I wouldn't have known. I never saw her wearing glasses."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. Raisin," said Jeffrey. "I never contacted her at all."

"I wonder why she said that?"

"My guess is that she didn't want to go through with it and thought up some excuse on the spur of the moment."

Agatha could not let it go. She set off in her car to drive to Jake Turnbull's farm. Agatha did not like farms. They were all right as a decoration to the countryside, but one didn't want to get close enough to be reminded that the charming animals were more than likely to end up on one's dinner plate.

Jake was standing beside a combine harvester in his yard, talking to one of his men. His face brightened when he saw Agatha.

"Let's have a coffee," he said. "I'm right glad to see you."

He certainly looked a lot healthier, but in Agatha's experience, once a chronic drunk, always a drunk.

She followed him into a dark, stone-flagged kitchen. It was cool and pleasant. A good Welsh dresser stood against one wall with an array of fine Crown Derby plates. Copper pans hung from hooks and there was a good smell of fresh coffee coming from a percolator on the counter.

"You're very comfortable here," said Agatha.

"A couple of women from the village do for me. Better than having a wife. You can't sack a wife without paying alimony. How do you like your coffee?"

"Black, please."

He put a mug of coffee in front of her and then a large glass ashtray. I shouldn't smoke, thought Agatha. I must give up. Oh, to hell with it. She lit a Bensons.

"I'm worried about Freda," she began.

"Why? Nasty bit o' goods."

"I called on her and she had a nasty bruise on her cheek. I was worried someone might have been trying to intimidate her. You see, she's dropped the case against me."

"I can't think of anyone who would be bothered. Mind you, me and Simon, Matilda and Harry would have liked to stop her going ahead, but none of us would attack her. She'd turn around and sue the socks off her, that one would."

Agatha had to accept the logic of this. But the weekend stretched ahead, empty and friendless. Well, not exactly friendless, she thought, brightening. She drove to the vicarage.

The vicar answered the door. "Yes?" he demanded.

"I've called to see your wife."

"She's busy." The door began to close. Agatha waited. She knew the vicar didn't like her. She could hear the sounds of an altercation and then the door was jerked open.

"Please come in," said Mrs. Bloxby, looking flushed. "We'll sit in the garden. Such a lovely day. One can almost feel spring arriving."

"Don't blame me for not getting rid of that harridan," came the vicar's voice from the study.

"He's not talking about you," said Mrs. Bloxby hurriedly.

Oh, yeah, thought Agatha, but said nothing, merely following the vicar's wife into the garden.

Agatha sat down in a garden seat. "I have something that's worrying me," she said. She told Mrs. Bloxby about Freda's bruise and change of heart.

"I think you should take time out from detecting," said Mrs. Bloxby. "I don't think there's any mystery there. Who are you left with? Old Mr. Dunster? He's hardly in a state to attack anyone."

Agatha then told her about Simon and Matilda becoming engaged. After that, Mrs. Bloxby talked about parish matters, and Agatha relaxed in her chair, soothed by her quiet voice.

But as soon as she had left the vicarage, it was as if Mrs. Bloxby were some tranquillising drug that was wearing off. Such as Freda surely did not give up easily.

Old Harry might be too frail to threaten anyone, but he might have an idea of who could have done it.

But when she called at Harry's cottage, it was to find he was not at home.

Simon had decided to take out what he called the Christmas party to a restaurant in Moreton-in-Marsh for dinner. It was only when they were all seated around the table that he said, "I should have asked Agatha. I've never asked her to any of our get-togethers. I always assumed she was busy, but it is the weekend."

"Phone her now," suggested Matilda.

"It might look rude. Too last minute. Besides, she must have a pretty full social life."

The woman with the "full social life" was at that very moment shoving a packet of The Swami's Chicken Vindaloo in the micro wave and hoping there might be something worth watching on television. Let it go, she told herself. You only think there's a mystery because you're bored.

But after she had gulped down the curry and let her cats out into the garden, she drove once more to Harry's cottage. It was on a rise above the village, a dismal little building of cheap red brick which had once been a farm labourer's cottage.

This time, Harry's mobility scooter was parked outside. Agatha rang the bell and waited, hearing shuffling footsteps approaching the door on the other side. The door creaked open and Harry, leaning heavily on the stick Agatha had given him, looked at her in surprise. "It's late," he said.

"Just wanted a word."

"What about?"

"Can I come in?"

"All right. But the place is a mess."

He shoved open a door leading to a parlour, which looked as if it were kept for "best." There was a black horse hair sofa dominating the room. Stuffed birds and animals in glass cases stood on a long oak sideboard. A dark oil painting of a rural scene hung over the sealed-up fireplace. In the middle of the room stood a small table surrounded by four upright chairs. The room smelled of dust, disinfectant, and essence of Harry: urine, sweat and mothballs.

"Sit down," ordered Harry, lowering himself painfully onto one of the chairs.

"Freda Pinch has decided to drop the case," said Agatha.

"That's good."

"Did you threaten her?"

“Look at me! I couldn’t even threaten a mouse.”

“It just seemed so odd that such a woman should change her mind.”

Harry cackled. “Well, there’s good in all of us. I have to get to bed. Is that all?”

“I suppose so. I’ll see myself out.” Agatha said goodnight and went outside the cottage.

She turned at the gate and looked back. She could see into the room she had left because the curtains hadn’t been drawn. Harry had got to his feet. He had a big smile on his face. As she watched, he raised his stick and swung it at some imaginary foe.

Agatha drove slowly home. She noticed her ex-husband James Lacey’s car parked outside his cottage.

She stopped her car, got out and rang his doorbell. “Why, Agatha!” exclaimed James when he opened the door. “It’s late. Anything up?”

“I could do with a bit of advice.”

“Come in and tell me what’s up. I read about you a while ago in the newspapers. Death by Christmas pudding. Now, there’s a first.”

If only our marriage had worked out, thought Agatha. James was as handsome as ever with his tall, rangy figure, dark hair and bright blue eyes. He was a retired colonel who wrote travel books and historical biographies. But he had proved to be a perpetual bachelor and rows had led to divorce. James brought her a gin and tonic and then said, “Tell me about it.”

So Agatha did while James tried to keep a straight face. “So what’s the problem?” he asked when she had finished. “The only proof you have is that you saw old Harry through the window, taking an imaginary swipe at someone.”

“He shouldn’t get away with hitting someone, even someone as horrible as Freda.”

“If you get the truth out of her, then what? A ninety-year-old pensioner will be charged with assault. Do you want that?”

“Not really.”

“So let it go.”

Business suddenly picked up for Agatha in the following months and she was able to forget about Harry. That was, until the wedding of Matilda and Simon. The church was full, the villagers always turning up in force for any wedding, whether they had been invited or not. Matilda’s son and daughter were there, looking furious. They could see their inheritance fading away.

Matilda was wearing a dull gold silk suit and a large hat embellished with silk flowers. Simon was in morning dress, very tight across the shoulders.

Agatha had chosen to wear a long floaty summer dress of chiffon patterned with large roses. She had an impulse to cry when they made their marriage vows. Agatha had been married twice and longed to give it another go, despite the fact that both marriages had been disasters.

Jake Turnbull was there, still looking amazingly healthy. Harry Dunster was in the glory of a very old morning suit which hung loosely on his skinny figure.

All Agatha’s niggling worries about Freda came back. She was sitting next to Mrs. Bloxby. “Have you heard anything about Freda?” she whispered.

“Don’t you know?” the vicar’s wife whispered back. “She sold up and left the village. I believe she bought a flat in Oxford.”

I don’t like that old codger getting away with it, thought Agatha fiercely. Okay,

Freda was a pain in the bum, but no man should get away with striking a woman.

A little voice in her head admonished her. You don't know he did anything. It could all be your imagination.

"I'm going to challenge Harry outright," Agatha whispered fiercely.

"It's a wedding!" said Mrs. Bloxby. "Don't do anything to spoil the day."

"Shhh!" said a man in the pew behind them.

The wedding service finished. Agatha and a few others had been invited to a restaurant in Moreton-in-Marsh for a celebration lunch.

The congregation filed out into the sunshine of the village churchyard. Agatha saw Harry standing over by a table tombstone. Ignoring Mrs. Bloxby's attempts to hold her back, she went up to him.

"Harry Dunster," said Agatha fiercely, "I swear you struck and threatened Freda."

"Lovely day, isn't it?" he said, looking up at the sky. "I'm waiting for my lift to Moreton."

"Answer me!" said Agatha. "Did you or did you not strike Freda?"

He grinned. "An old man like me?"

"Come along, Mrs. Raisin," urged Ms. Bloxby, pulling at her arm.

Agatha turned away.

"Oh, Mrs. Raisin," called Harry.

Agatha turned back.

He winked at her, waved the stick she had bought him and swiped it through the air. "Gotcha!" he cried. "Take that!"

He began to laugh, a horrible wheezing, cackling sound. Then he lost his balance, staggered backwards, his arms flailing and fell down against the tombstone, cracking his head on the edge of it.

Agatha rushed forward and bent over him. Blood was oozing from his head. The bells from the church tower pealed out deafeningly over the scene.

His eyes flickered open. "Got your answer," he mumbled, and then all life drained out of him.

Two weeks later, Agatha was being interviewed for the local newspaper, the *Mircester Times*. It was the silly season and the editor had decided that an interview with a local detective would fill up the pages. Agatha had agreed to it, on the condition that there should be no mention of the Christmas pudding affair.

She bragged happily about all her successful cases with a few embellishments. Then she posed for photographs, something she hated to do.

"A few more questions, Mrs. Raisin," said the interviewer, a thin, nervous girl with great ambitions but little talent. "Would you consider yourself a feminist?"

"That is a hard question to reply to," said Agatha. "If one says 'yes,' one is damned as having hairy legs, a bullying attitude, a hatred of men and no bra. If one says 'no,' then people think one is old-fashioned and believes that men know better."

"So what *are* you?"

"I am unique," said Agatha crossly. "Now, if we could just wind this thing up . . ."

"One more question. Have you ever believed someone to be guilty of a crime but were unable to prove it?"

Suddenly, Agatha was back in the churchyard. Harry cackled in the sunlight and swung his stick.

"No," said Agatha Raisin firmly. "Never."

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.